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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 SANTO DOMINGO 005004

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN INDUSTRIAL DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN

REF: 05 SANTO DOMINGO 4805

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. The intentional gas release by the National Refinery (REFIDOMSA) on October 24 revealed how poorly the Dominican petrochemical industry regulates itself. It also revealed how ill prepared the city of Santo Domingo and the Dominican government are in preparing for or responding to industrial accidents, natural disasters or terrorism. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) On the afternoon of Sunday, October 24, the Refineria Dominicana de Petroleo station number 5 began to release mercaptan gas from a storage tank over the Caribbean Sea. The intent was to empty the storage tank for cleaning. After a large amount of gas had been released into the atmosphere, the wind changed direction and the gas drifted back over the city of Haina (west of Santo Domingo) and the southern districts of Santo Domingo, causing widespread illness and emergency room visits.

[1](#)3. (U) LP Gas in its natural state is odorless and colorless. Mercaptan is the chemical component added to the LP Gas to produce the characteristic smell. Mercaptan is considered an environmental irritant and is hazardous only in large quantities, causing asphyxiation by displacing oxygen. In lesser quantities it causes respiratory irritation.

[1](#)4. (U) Unofficial reports from local medical contacts estimate the number of victims seeking urgent medical care to have been approximately 7,000. Five families from the official American community visited local emergency rooms with multiple family members complaining of nausea, vomiting, and numbness in their arms and legs. Several American children from the Embassy community became ill after being dropped off at Carol Morgan School. Carol Morgan and several other schools in the area later closed after the noxious fumes related to the gas release had sickened many children. Three local fatalities are being blamed on the gas release. Physicians said the gas had exacerbated previously existing medical conditions. As a result of the gas release, the "Gringo" neighborhood in Haina was in a state of chaos. The medical center closest to the refinery did not have electricity to treat patients and several medical staff became ill from fumes rising from patients, clothing. Clinic director Catalina Bido stayed on duty although she was nauseous and vomited twice and was suffering from fatigue and headaches, symptoms consistent with gas intoxication.

[1](#)5. (SBU) An inspector within REFIDOMSA station number 5, who asked not to be named, commented that these events were far from unexpected. The inspector says that the plant is rife with safety violations. Toxic gases are routinely emitted into the atmosphere or drained into the sea. Safety equipment is routinely not used and inspection violations or complaints are quickly swept under the rug.

[1](#)6. (U) The local fire department headquarters related in an internal memo that the mercaptan gas was released so that the plant could clean their storage facility but that an unexpected wind change toward the city caused temporary contamination of the city.

[1](#)7. (U) Immediately after the incident, Refidomsa President Aristides Fernandez Zucco and Industry and Commerce Minister Francisco Javier Castillo offered contradictory versions of the origins of the leak. Fernandez Zucco changed his story the next day and President Fernandez dismissed him that evening (reftel). A committee from the National Emergency Commission is investigating whether there was malpractice or a lack of compliance with procedures for the management of cases like this.

[1](#)8. (U) A greater question remains. Why was there such a poor local and federal response to the disaster?

[1](#)9. (SBU) While the Dominican Republic has a "911" system, citizens place very low confidence in the authorities' ability to respond. When disasters occur, citizens express

their distress over the local radio waves and in the printed press. One caller related, "I didn't know whether I should open my doors and windows or close them. Was my neighborhood in danger? Should I flee? No information from anyone!"

110. (SBU) Citizens' skepticism concerning the emergency medical system may be valid. After the October 24 gas release city and national officials offered no comment for a full 24 hours, and then they spoke to emphasize that their agencies were not at fault. At no point did anyone provide the medical community or local citizens with information on the gas release or what they could do to keep themselves or their community safe. Had the gas been a more toxic substance, thousands would have been killed.

111. (SBU) Disaster preparedness reform is needed in the Dominican Republic. Currently the city and federal emergency response organization do not work well together. Each organization zealously guards its own territory.

112. (U) Law 147 of 2002, created a national system for prevention, mitigation and response to deal with natural and man-made disasters. This law designated 22 government institutions to form part of the National Emergency Commission (CNE). Several non-governmental organizations also belong, including telecoms and electricity distribution companies and the Red Cross. A tripartite council including the head of Civil Defense, a representative of the Army and Santo Domingo Fire Chief heads the commission. The Head of the Civil Defense is the Executive Director of CNE.

113. (SBU) Institutional issues hindered response to the mercaptan gas release, although many consider the industrial establishments in Haina to be the equivalent of a ticking time bomb. Recent changes in city districting have left Haina outside the jurisdiction of the Santo Domingo Fire Department. And the Fernandez administration has shifted the policy, planning and preventive aspects of the Disaster Law back to the Technical Secretariat of the Presidency. This leaves CNE and COE outside of the planning loop, providing immediate emergency response only.

114. (SBU) Traditionally, local police and fire departments are the frontline guardians of public health and safety. These institutions suffer from poor coordination, lack of funding for training, and the lack of authority to inspect, enforce, or investigate issues of public safety. On the day of the gas release, the office of military intelligence sent investigators to REFIDOMSA to bring the refinery technical manager back to military offices for questioning. The police and fire are not fully integrated in the greater command-and-control system, and their expertise goes largely ignored.

115. (SBU) The government needs to re-assess their ability to prepare and respond to disasters. The national 911 system needs to be effectively managed so as to gain the confidence of the public. While radio and TV reporters reported what they could learn during the event to report what they knew, the government had no plan to integrate the press into their disaster response system.

116. (U) The U.S. Office of Overseas Preparedness (OFDA) has provided significant training to Dominican authorities through USAID for disaster preparedness in the past. Unfortunately, when the administration changed in August 2004, the trained technicians were replaced with political appointees with little knowledge of the work.

117. (U) Finally, the GODR needs to re-examine their disaster plan, practice it, and correct problems before worse disasters occur.

118. (U) Drafted by Medical Officer Ty Flewelling.
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